

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1-B

WASHINGTON TIMES
31 May 1985

How the N.Y. Times destroyed a charity

By Don Kowet
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A New York Times story, charging an aid scam at the expense of starving Ethiopian children, unleashed a chain of similarly unsubstantiated reports, demonstrating the awesome power of that newspaper over the nation's press.

On Jan. 11 of this year, in the heat of heartrending newspaper and television reports depicting the plight of starving Ethiopians, The New York Times published a shocking front-page exposé by its Los Angeles bureau chief, Robert Lindsey.

The article said in its opening paragraph that a famine-relief organization called International Christian Aid (ICA), "using poignant television appeals," had "raised millions of dollars in contributions for children in drought-stricken Ethiopia" but had not delivered a single cent in aid.

Later in the article, Mr. Lindsey reported that an unnamed "experienced fund-raiser familiar with [ICA's] operations" estimated that ICA had probably collected "more than \$20 million" [emphasis added] in contributions for famine relief in Ethiopia.

The New York Times had tossed a pebble into the pond. The ripples quickly reached almost every print and broadcast outlet in the United States and many abroad. If the reporters had been less awed by the newspaper's reputation, they might have noticed that The New York Times' bold accusation about ICA was built on the shifting sands of unidentified sources.

A survey of approximately 150 sample newspaper, magazine, wire service and television reports sparked by that New York Times story revealed a disturbing journalistic syndrome: an unsubstantiated headline hardening overnight into unassailable fact, as recycled rumors passed from mouth to media

mouth. Within two weeks, without an iota of additional concrete evidence, The New York Times' original claim of "millions" or "\$20 million" collected (and pocketed) by ICA would be swollen by others into \$33 million.

EXCERPTED

• "The documentation [from ICA] may look like it's bona fide," said Mr. Lindsey. "But at the same time, I'm talking to former employees that tell me that it's a kind of whitewash. It's a difficult problem. You either use Joe Bass as a source, or you get people who were former employees, who have an axe to grind because they were fired or they left unhappy." It is understandable, perhaps inevitable, that Mr. Lindsey did not include balancing documentary rebuttals in his Jan. 11 article. Most were not made available by ICA until a later date. What boggles the mind is the hypnotic trance the initial New York Times report induced. Long after contrary evidence was available, the media would still be chanting Mr. Lindsey's litany of charges, mesmerized by The New York Times' legendary infallibility.

Mr. Lindsey's story, sent over the New York Times wire, caught the attention of other reporters. On Jan. 15, Jay Mathews of The Washington

Post reported that the State Department said it had never even heard of CRDA, the organization in Ethiopia through which ICA had contracted to channel supplies. The following day, Mr. Mathews reported that the State Department had changed its mind: CRDA was a legitimate and respected organization. The State Department's denial, but not its correction, would keep popping up in newspaper reports throughout March.

Meanwhile, reporters kept attempting to develop the story. With the exception of reporters such as The Washington Post's Jay Mathews and The Los Angeles Times' Eric Malnic, who both did original reporting, making efforts to look into allegations on their own rather than merely parroting them, most reporters were content merely to air new unsubstantiated charges from additional unnamed sources. Mr. Lind-

sey reported in a follow-up that ICA "might have secreted its ill-gotten riches in Swiss bank accounts; that security was so tight, some employees of ICA suspected the organization was a front for the CIA; that ICA headquarters had a secret 'counting room,' where donations were ostensibly diverted from their rightful purpose. None of these claims has ever been substantiated, beyond the gossip of former ICA employees. Yet these allegations, legitimized by The New York Times, were treated by hundreds of newspapers and television outlets as unchallengeable fact.

The idiocy reached its apogee in late January, when NBC's "Nightly News With Tom Brokaw" broadcast a report charging that Mr. Bass had given two of his sons and a high-ranking employee company loans at interest rates lower than those then prevailing. NBC showed a financial report, focusing on InterAid's worldwide income for all of 1983 — \$33 million.

But the Associated Press report that went all over the United States the next day (and, indeed, all over the world) quoted NBC News as saying that Mr. Bass "had used part of the \$33 million donated to starving Ethiopians [emphasis added] to make more than \$47,000 in loans to his son . . ." The Ethiopian campaign, of course, had taken place in 1984, not 1983. An ICA audit would claim income from that campaign as \$1.3 million worldwide, and \$352,358 in the United States alone.

EXCERPTED